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## **PUBLIC PARKS IN THE NORTH: DESIGNED TO LIBERATE OR DISCIPLINE OUR BODIES?**

**Abstract:** While access to the urban environment depends on practical needs and economic power, public parks appear to provide access to all. Replacing practical and economic interests by playgrounds, sport facilities, and fresh greenery, public parks promote not only public health but also social integration. Yet public parks are not neutral; they shape our bodily action and interaction. This shaping may be called social choreographies, and social choreographies are strongly ideological. Thus, recent park designs of the Nordic countries are liberal and inclusive in accord with the Social Democratic and liberal tradition of these countries. Still one may ask whether such liberal inclusiveness is not a political tool to better control the moving body? When skateboarders and parkourists are encouraged to use large-scale facilities constructed in the peripheries of public parks, can this be a way for the authorities to confine highly mobile and anarchic elements to special designated areas?

**Keywords:** Public parks, moving bodies, social choreography, social interaction, social control.

### **Introduction**

Public parks do not appear accidentally in the urban environment. In fact, in the battlefield of commercial interests that make up the urban environment, parks would not exist were it not for a political will to exempt attractive lots from profitable development. So what is it that motivates decision makers to prioritise a public park before a parking lot, a shopping mall or a row of apartment buildings? What is a public park believed to provide which the urban environment cannot otherwise provide? Is it liberation from the constraints of our urban everyday or is it just another strategy to discipline, if not control, our movements? If we follow Michel de Certeau in his distinction between the power's *strategies* on the one hand and the powerless' *tactics* on the other, as their way to interpret and perhaps divert the strategies (Certeau, 1988), then which are the tactics we encounter in public parks?

Following up Michel de Certeau's studies of everyday practices, Henri Lefèbvre maintains that built environment is not only *produced space* but an ongoing *production of space* taking place through the social practices we perform (Lefèbvre, 1991). In this perspective, public parks offer a particularly interesting case as the social practices performed in parks differ so radically from the habitual "rhythms of the everyday life", to use another of Lefèbvre's notions. This difference, however, between the everyday built environment and the exceptional public parks does not mean that the latter are exempt of conflicting interests; but other interests appear and other conflicts find other solutions. Parks are not exempt of struggles for territories, governance, of gendered and racial power relations; but in public parks these issues are largely articulated by moving bodies and concern the behaviour they perform in the greenery: riding on a bicycle or struggling in a wheelchair, skateboarding or sleeping on a bench, feeding the swans in the lake or having improvised sex in the shrubbery.

### **Social choreographies**

Lefèbvre defines a *place* in terms of its distinctive "rhythm of life"; David Seamon speaks of a distinctive "place ballet" that "fosters a strong, even profound, sense of place and has implications for planning and design" (Seamon, 2015: 56-57). Referring to Seamon, Tim

Cresswell himself speaks of “particular patterns of movement that make sense together” (Cresswell, 2010: 18).

In the present study, I prefer to use the notion *social choreographies* (Hewitt, 2005) to encompass “social practices”, “rhythms”, and “place ballets”. Social choreographies, as the citizens’ bodily responses to the material conditions and cultural conventions they encounter in public space, are an emergent field of study with a large potential. Not only because they replace ontological definitions by performative ones, but also because they emphasize the embodied and practiced dimension of ideology. Social choreographies reflect the changing ideological framework within which we perform our actions and interactions in society – in some cases by accepting this framework, in other cases by rejecting it (Parviainen 2010).

### **Parks as ideology**

It is obvious that the social choreographies we perform in a public park will differ from the choreographies prevalent in other parts of the city: in the absence of cars, shops, work places, and housing, we move and interact differently already because we cannot pursue the practical activities we otherwise carry out in the city. In a park, with a more or less nature-like layout, our pragmatic goals yield to a more relaxed, playful, sensuous behaviour. This, however, should not make us forget that even the simplest playground contributes to shape small bodies, and that all parks materialise an ideological agenda.

Not only are parks as such the results of explicit political negotiations; their layout will also testify to specific ideological priorities encouraging certain groups of the population to use the park, and use it for certain activities deemed desirable; while keeping other groups and other activities at a distance. A park, as the urban “other”, redefines and redistributes public space, but how does it do it and whom does it benefit (Mitchell, 2003)?

The present paper sets out to answer two questions: How does the ideological strategy materialise in the lay-out of a public park? And which social practices or tactics do users of the park perform in response to this lay-out? The two questions can also be asked as follows: Which social choreography do the authorities envisage in the park? And which social choreographies do the park users perform in the park?

To answer these questions, with a special regard to the ideological framework of the Nordic countries (Brandal et al., 2013), the paper will present and analyse one park in Copenhagen, Denmark, constructed in the 1910s, and another park opened hundred years later, in 2017, in Oslo, Norway.

### **Fælledparken in Copenhagen**

The first tree in the Fælledpark in Copenhagen was planted in 1911 by the mayor Jensen from the Danish Social Democratic Party. The “people’s park” he thereby inaugurated was intended as an alternative to the older formal parks of Copenhagen, the oldest of which were originally royal gardens, while later parks were constructed for the “leisure class”. Comprising more than 500.000 m<sup>2</sup> of a former “common” (which is the meaning of the Danish word *fælled*) that used to provide summer pastures to the cows of Copenhagen, the new Fælledpark had from the beginning a distinct social aspect. Moreover, in a famous battle that took place in this very common on May 1<sup>st</sup> in 1872, shortly after the fall of the Paris Commune, the police force had violently suppressed a first rally of workers’ claiming their right to vote. This battle occasioned the founding of the Danish Social Democratic party (Brandal et al. 2013: 26). These two narratives, in combination with a public health programme typical of the 1910s, defined the ideological premises of the Fælledpark. The mayor intended it explicitly to host the 1<sup>st</sup> of May celebrations and other large scale political as well as gymnastic assemblies. The good Danish beer, believed to promote social integration, has always been endemic to the Fælledpark. However, in spite of today’s mayor of Copenhagen again being a member of the Social Democratic Party, and furthermore again carrying the name Jensen (a typical worker’s name in

Denmark), the Fælledpark is in a process of gentrification: It now stages an annual carnival, the seasonal opening of the Royal Opera and other large scale concerts, in addition to a great many sports events.

An impressive skateboard facility was constructed in the perimeters of the park already in 1988 (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Skaters in Fælledparken in search of authenticity. Copenhagen 2015. Photo: Robert Loeber

To celebrate its 100 years jubilee, the park recently underwent a total renovation including the construction of a conspicuous water play/sport ground and a number of other similar facilities. From having united workers in their struggle for civil rights and improved working conditions, the park now, under the influence of growing neoliberalism, has down-toned the political aspect of the park and instead united the citizens in the careless consumption of beer, ice cream and leisure entertainment.

English-speaking tourist read the following online presentation of the park: “On May Day you can join the crowds in Fælledparken, one of central Copenhagen’s biggest parks, for a day of ice cream, concerts, speeches and solidarity. But you don’t have to get political if you don’t want to. May 1st is when Danes celebrate International Workers’ Day, with citizens coming out in their hundreds to celebrate solidarity. The idea of solidarity is an important concept in Danish society, and the May 1st celebrations are a fine way to get an insight into an interesting aspect of the Danish psyche. It’s easy enough to check out the event as a spectator, and if you do, the marches, red flags and songs are likely to be unlike any public holiday you’ve seen before. Denmark’s down-to-earth approach to unions and workers’ rights means that May 1 will be just as much about the concerts and food stands as it is about the storming political speeches.” (<https://www.routesnorth.com/event/may-1st-faelledparken-copenhagen/>)

The wording is revelatory of a number of quite characteristic features of present day’s Nordic ideology, including some of its inherent paradoxes. In fact, all the Nordic countries would label themselves as “welfare states”. This implies not only extensive social services offered free of

charge to all citizens, likeschooling, health care, and pensions, and special support to disfavoured groups of the population; more technically, “the Nordic model” implies very regulated yearly negotiations between employers and employees concerning wages and working conditions (Brandal et al. 2013: 81-82). Since the inauguration of the Fælledpark, therefore, the international workers’ day has lost some of its political relevance; which explains why “you don’t have to get political if you don’t want to”. The Social Democrats, who have ruled Denmark during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, obviously prefer to celebrate their achievements rather than pinpoint what remains to be achieved, and when they encourage people to participate in the May 1<sup>st</sup> celebration they replace politics by ice cream and concerts. May 1<sup>st</sup> is choreographed as a procession of well-fed Danes dressed up as workers singing workers’ songs and waving red flags: “Denmark’s down-to-earth approach to unions and workers’ rights means that May 1st will be just as much about the concerts and food stands as it is about the storming political speeches”. The May 1st celebration may indeed provide “an insight into an interesting aspect of the Danish psyche”, namely the way in which solidarity, this “important concept in Danish society”, has been transformed from political action into passive consumption of inclusive entertainment.

The insight will reveal also another interesting aspect of the Danish psyche: the avoidance of violent confrontations and a rather ready submission by the population to the official park strategy. The main controversy seems in fact to be the one concerning the massive use of disposable grills on the lawns. The park liberally invites its users to enjoy a relaxed social choreography, walking, playing and sitting down to picnic wherever they please. Yet a lightweight aluminium grill lit directly on the lawn leaves a rectangular patch of burnt grass which disturbs the aesthetics of the park. The park authorities, consequently, have prohibited the use of disposables grills, offering instead to the picnic people immovable barbecues of concrete and steel constructed in places deemed appropriate.

Also skateboarders and parkourists are encouraged to use the park for their kinds of choreography, though in similar fashion only the built skateboard facilities and parkour course in the peripheral sections of the park. The intention is to prevent skateboarders from using and perhaps degrading sections of the urban environment outside the park which are not intended for such use; and also that they will abstain from using sections inside the park which are meant for other choreographies. The intention, in short, is to control the bodies whose very motor capacity makes them potentially uncontrollable and transgressive.

With its nature-like lay-out, the Fælledpark in Copenhagen does indeed offer large spaces to free movements which would be seen as inappropriate in other parts of the city. Yet this freedom of movement is not unlimited: when the authorities say “freedom” they simultaneously intend “control” and “order”. The motor capacity is inherent in our body, and we not only have the capacity to move, we need movement to feel alive. But our motor capacity must be contained. One way to contain the moving body is to engage it in movements that do not result in locomotion: body-building, football playing, pool swimming, tread mills, skateboard loops. We move, we spend our time moving, but we remain where we are. We are kept active but neither producing anything nor moving anywhere.

### **The World Park at Furuset in Oslo**

The World Park at Furuset is a small oasis for social intercourse, training, play and enjoyment. The park is lit, it comprises a pretty lake and seven meeting places where people can sit down and grill: big braziers are for public use. An idyllic stream runs through the middle of the park, and on the southern side, you will find an orchard with fruit and berries which are at anybody’s disposal. The World Park also has a large playground landscape with devices appropriate for play activities both summer and winter. In the World Park you will also find Norway’s first parkour park including an obstacle race and apparatuses for body building. The parkour park at Furuset was Norway’s first when it was completed in 2012. The park is open for all and free of charge. In order to practice parkour or to test out and enjoy the facilities you don’t

need to be very advanced. A little playfulness and the desire to move your body in new and creative ways is all that's needed. In addition to the classical parkourelements, you also find a climbing wall which will suit you if you are into climbing. Or perhaps you prefer trials of strengths in which your own body's weight is the only resistance? There are lots of racks and obstacles if you want to challenge yourself and your strength. Here you may perform all variants from pushups and dips to more demanding sportive exercises. The important thing is not to be best but to challenge oneself, try out, train, experience mastery, enjoyment and improvement!" (Oslo Municipality's webpage <https://nyhetsrom.bymiljoetaten.no/opplevoslo/verdensparken/>).

The ideological agenda is explicit in this official presentation: a number of buzzwords prove its "political correctness". An egalitarian and inclusive society like Norway must promote "social intercourse", "open access", "enjoyments free of charge", it must encourage "moving one's body in new and creative ways", "challenging one-self" and "experiencing mastery". And the webpage significantly stresses "play" – not competition.

The World Park in Oslo was constructed in a neighbourhood with increasing social problems, partly due to a particularly high concentration of recent immigrants awaiting more permanent housing. The drop-out rates of the schools are high as is the number of unemployed; drugs and criminality follow. The park was intended as one of several strategic measures to counteract this negative development, and in the longer run hopefully make the neighbourhood more attractive even to ethnic Norwegians. Already early in the planning process, representatives of a broad variety of ethnic, social, and age groups among the local population were invited to participate in designing the park and the facilities they wanted it to contain. Thereby, integration began already in the planning process. As the work progressed, the local population was also invited to participate, together with artist, in the practical realisation of the projects. Practical participation in local projects is a distinctive Norwegian tradition called *dugnad*; it accounts for a considerable portion of the social activities undertaken in local communities; teaching the immigrants this civic virtue was also part of the intentions. By involving the grassroots, the authorities not only hoped the park would indeed meet the needs and wishes of the population; they also hoped an active collaboration would give to the citizens a feeling of ownership, facilitate integration, and prevent certain groups from feeling excluded and thereby hostile to the park. It is no chance that so much emphasis is being put on the conspicuous parkour course, the first of its kind to be constructed by a Norwegian municipality.

Lefèbvre maintains, as we remember, that our environment is not only produced space but an ongoing production of space that takes place through the social practices we perform (Lefèbvre, 1991). While political correctness thus has defined the strategic premises of the World Park from the very beginning of the planning process till production of the space was completed in 2017, the question is how the space is presently being produced through the social practices that its users perform there.

The park is not very much frequented. Some of the citizens who were active in planning and building the park have now moved and others who were not involved feel no ownership to the park. The park offers very attractive playgrounds and pools, so parents take their children there to play, and young people in their twenties use the immovable concrete and steel barbecues that have been constructed here, like in Copenhagen. But that does not make the park, not even the parkour race very attractive to the teenagers. To become a trustworthy life world, the park users must redefine it in their own terms and experience it over time with both body and mind (Seamon, 2015). Parkour and skateboarding may be considered as sports, and they do benefit from sophisticated facilities as those in the parks; but parkour and skateboarding are also subcultures that thrive in the social peripheries, and some of their attraction gets lost as soon as the mainstream culture takes over the management and determines which route the young people are to follow. The deserted parkour course in Furuset (Fig. 2) shows that the young people had other things in mind and body.



Figure 2. The Verdenspark parkour race redefined. Oslo 2018. Foto: Mikkel B. Tin

### How control bodies that move?

Urban planners may determine the width of the sidewalk and the kind of pavement that is to cover it. But they cannot foresee whether a pedestrian will keep walking on the sidewalk or cross the street. In this sense, according to Michel de Certeau, there will always be unintended tactical responses to the strategic framework of the urban planners. These responses begin with the unforeseen operations that take place in urban space – the improvised ways it is being practiced. What distinguishes tactics from strategies, then, “concerns the *types of operations* and the role of spaces: strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” (Certeau, 1988: 30).

Cresswell gives a very succinct summary of the situation: “Think of a new green rectangle of lawn in a town or a city somewhere. Trees are planted in the middle and two footpaths meet in the exact center to divide the lawn into four smaller rectangles. The lawn is surrounded by roads and buildings. To get across the lawn to the opposite corner the pedestrian is supposed to either walk around the rectangle or use the paths through it. Invariably some people will simply walk across the lawn diagonally. After a few weeks a path will appear – a mud path which becomes the material manifestation of people’s desire to take short cuts. Imagine the planners and architects have also provided benches around the circumference as well as steps and a piece of public art in the middle. Soon homeless people use the benches for a night’s sleep and skateboarders use the art as an obstacle course. The point is that human agency is not so easily structured and structures themselves are made through the repetition of practices by agents”. (Cresswell, 2004: 36). A social choreography imposed from above as a strategy is less likely to succeed than a social choreography left to structure itself as a tactical response through the everyday agency of citizens – but tactics need strategies more as driving forces than strategies need tactics.

The maintenance of power depends on strategies. And there are basically two strategies to choose between: the repressive strategy and the liberal strategy. The two park examples from

Denmark and Norway respectively are obvious expressions of liberal strategies, in line with the ideological framework of these social-democratic countries: while the urban environment generally imposes efficiency on us as producers, consumers and commuters, public parks liberate us from practical demands, proposing a space for movements and activities that have their goal in themselves. The liberal strategy of parks will enhance this freedom of the individual to develop and release their physical propensities; and at the same time offer spaces for social interaction and training of social skills. In the name of “political correctness”, the public parks invite all groups to join in, yet this official inclusion may be also a means of control. There is a significant question mark following the subtitle “Individual liberty through state regulation?” in (Brandal et al. 2013: 99). When the youngsters of fifteen are invited in, in specially designated areas of the parks, is it to prevent their potential disobedience? Can the political correctness of mainstream culture grow to hegemonic dimensions and end up as totalitarian?

Can one perceive something like a “repressive tolerance” (Marcuse, 1965) in the authorities’ eagerness to construct skateboard and parkour facilities in one corner of their parks, while public grills of concrete and steel in the opposite corner are intended to promote integration of “our new fellow citizens”? Can it be that moving bodies are perceived as threats to the public order as soon as they leave the prescribed race route? Can it be that improvised movements disturb the streamlined social machinery? That social choreographies become dangerous when bodies leave the tracks and aimless treadmills of the parks? When leaving their disfavoured neighbourhood and seek out social interaction in more challenging arenas (Rosenblatt et al., 2009)? When geographical territories are replaced by improvised communities that can no longer be identified on the map?

“When tolerance mainly serves the protection and preservation of a repressive society, when it serves to neutralize opposition and to render men immune against other and better forms of life, then tolerance has been perverted” (Marcuse, 1965: 10).

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